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ABSTRACT

Multiage education involves placing children of different ages, abilities, and emotional maturity in the same classroom. Research indicates that heterogeneous grouping promotes cognitive and social growth, reduces antisocial behavior, and facilitates the use of research-based, developmentally appropriate instructional practices. Because multiage education is unfamiliar to most citizens, it is crucial for these programs to garner parent and community support. This digest summarizes research findings on how schools can create support for multiage education. Topics include the importance of parent and community support, the ways in which multiage practices can be effectively communicated, the ways in which parents and the community can be involved, the obstacles that can hinder meaningful parent involvement, and the ways in which parents and community members can participate in decision making. (LMI)

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ERIC DIGEST

JULY 1997 NUMBER 114 EDO-EA-97-6

Building Support for Multiage Education

By Joan Gaustad

Multiage education involves placing children of different ages, abilities, and emotional maturity in the same classroom. Students are frequently regrouped for different learning activities rather than being consistently segregated by chronological age, and they often remain with the same teacher or teaching team for more than one year. Many different labels have been applied to such classes, including *family grouping, blends, nongraded,* and *multiage continuous progress.*

Research indicates that heterogeneous grouping promotes cognitive and social growth, reduces antisocial behavior, and facilitates the use of research-based developmentally appropriate instructional practices such as active learning and integrated curriculum. The wider range of ages and abilities in a multiage classroom discourages misleading age-graded expectations and helps teachers focus on students' individual learning needs.

Why Is Parent and Community Support Important?

Parent and community support benefits all types of educational endeavors by positively affecting student learning, but it is particularly crucial for multiage programs because the approach is unfamiliar to most citizens.

Multiage practices have evolved gradually over decades as research revealed more about learning and child development. But to adults whose last contact with elementary education occurred during their own childhoods, these practices can seem a sudden, radical departure from familiar ways.

Multiage practices are vulnerable to misunderstanding and can stimulate violent opposition if efforts are not made to explain and build support among parents, the local education community, and the general public.

How Can Information about Multiage Practices Be Effectively Communicated?

Information should be communicated in many ways to be accessible to adults with different learning styles, backgrounds, and personalities, just as instruction is offered in many different formats to reach students in multiage classrooms.

Written forms of communication include newsletters, brochures, copies of published articles, and teacher-written notes and letters. Surveys and questionnaires encourage parent feedback and suggestions. Newspapers and other local media are the main sources of education information for many citizens, but because many reporters are unfamiliar with multiage practices, administrators must ensure that information about multiage programs is understood and reported accurately.

Informational meetings can range from formal presentations and participatory workshops to informal parent-teacher coffees. Schools should schedule meetings to accommodate both working and nonworking parents. Educator Colleen Politano finds that involving students in presentations increases parent attendance as well as effectively demonstrates multiage activities (Gaustad, forthcoming). Parents of children in multiage programs also make convincing presenters. Classroom visits or videotapes of multiage activities are also valuable.

Word-of-mouth communication is a powerful tool that can elicit support for multiage programs. Multiage teachers and principals have an important role to play in this regard, but any member of the education community, from custodian to school board member, may share information and opinions with curious citizens. Therefore, it is essential to educate all members of the school or district about multiage practices.

How Can Parents and the Community Be Involved in Multiage Education?

The multiage approach encourages students to learn from each other as well as from the teacher, and multiage teachers often work in teams, helping and learning from each other. Adult volunteers are natural additions to such a "community of learners" (Chase and Doan 1994). In addition to assisting teachers with labor-intensive multiage methods, participating in instruction helps volunteers learn about multiage practices and see how they benefit children. Volunteers often increase community support by conveying information and positive attitudes about multiage education to friends and neighbors.

Parent and community volunteers can participate in instruction

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in many ways. They can give special whole-class presentations, teach ongoing classes in art, science, or languages to small groups, or tutor individual students. Parents can also participate in instruction at home, guided by written directions for homework assignments or suggestions for ways to reinforce their child's learning. Instructional skills can be taught at volunteer training workshops. Volunteers can also provide behind-the-scenes support with activities such as preparing materials, fundraising, and organizing volunteer activities.

Depending on their resources, businesses can offer support ranging from modest, one-time donations to ongoing business partnerships. Businesses can encourage employees to volunteer in the schools by providing paid release time or allowing flexible schedules. Kentucky business leaders formed the Partnership for Kentucky School Reform (1996) to support implementation of the new multiage Primary Program and other reforms.

What Obstacles Can Hinder Meaningful Parent Involvement?

Multiage programs typically describe parents as "partners in education" and seek to involve them in instruction in substantive ways. However, meaningful parent involvement can be hindered by ingrained attitudes and lack of experience.

In traditional age-graded schools, parent involvement is often limited to nonclassroom support tasks. Teachers work autonomously in classrooms "separated by time, space, and curriculum" (Miller 1994), rarely collaborating even with fellow professionals. Parents and teachers must acquire new skills and change old attitudes to become effective partners.

Teachers may be uncomfortable sharing control or fear that involving volunteers will lower the quality of instruction. They may believe parents are uninterested or have little to contribute. They may be reluctant to admit potentially critical "outsiders" to their classrooms while they are still mastering multiage practices, or may feel overwhelmed by the additional time demands of training and organizing volunteers. Parents may doubt their ability to contribute or believe they should not "interfere" with instruction. They may distrust educators or educational innovations because of past negative experiences with the school system.

Negative preconceptions are more likely to be replaced by trust and good will if teachers and parents have positive experiences sharing thoughts and feelings and working together. Planners must surmount practical obstacles such as parents' work schedules, their need to care for other children, and teachers' needs for administrative support and training in how to work effectively with adult volunteers.

Fully mastering multiage practices takes years. Teachers can work more comfortably with parents during this ongoing process if their principal strives to create a school climate supportive of change —a climate in which it is accepted that mistakes are a normal part of learning and growing (Miller).

How Can Parents and Community Members Participate in Decision-Making?

Parents should have input into significant instructional and assessment decisions concerning their child, as well as major decisions that affect their child's school or program, such as whether multiage practices should be adopted. Parents should also decide whether their child attends a multiage class.

Participation in decision-making increases ownership and support for multiage education, as it does for any innovation. Parents, educators, and other stakeholders should be included in the planning process from the beginning. Parent and community representatives can serve on school advisory councils or multiage study committees. All parents should have opportunities to voice concerns at each stage of the implementation process via such means as meetings and surveys.

Planners should expect conflict to arise during the course of decision-making. Calkins (1992) urges school leaders to regard disagreements as normal and to be open to learning from other members of the school community. He advises administrators to educate themselves about consensus-building strategies and the change process in order to manage conflict constructively.

Superior solutions sometimes arise from the interaction of participants with different perspectives. At Boeckman Creek Primary School in Wilsonville, Oregon, skeptical parents joined the multiage evaluation team and helped devise a rigorous evaluation process that satisfied even the most doubtful (Gaustad). Administrators, teachers, parents, and community members can follow Boeckman Creek's example, working together to create and refine successful multiage programs.

RESOURCES

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